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Scuttle Butt – October 2012

By Rod Palm

Well folks. This one is for you hardcore Killer Whale (KW) groupies. This year Jared Towers, Graeme Ellis and John Ford published (now here's a windy title) "Photo Identification Catalogue of Bigg's (Transient) Killer Whales from Coastal Waters of British Columbia, Northern Washington and Southeastern Alaska." Let's just call it "The Catalogue". While Fisheries and Oceans had published several catalogues in the past, this one has both left and right side dorsal fin ID images and a more detailed look at lineage.

As the KWs that we normally see here in Clayoquot are in the catalogue and with an interest in being able to query various aspects of them we entered each animal's ID#, date of birth and sex onto a spread sheet to see what we could learn by entering a couple of formulas and doing some sorting.

What first comes to our attention is that there are only 272 of this unique genetic culture of wandering KWs. While this number does not represent a decline, it does give us pause to appreciate just how valuable this small population is. The stable population is agreed to be relative to our strong numbers of pinnipeds (seals and sea lions) that are the greater part of their diet. Another indication of population stability is that of the adult animals, 64% are adult females.

As a bit of trivia, the oldest living Bigg's KW is the bull Yankee 1 (T031) who is now at the ripe old age of 58. The oldest living female is listed as the Secret Agent, Innis (T007) who is 51. The concern with her however is that she visited Clayoquot every year since 1991 and no one has seen her now since August 2010. The next oldest female is the 49 year old Wakana (T011) who has visited us, every year of the study, with her 34 year old son Rainney (T011A). Also 49 is Langara (T010) who travels with her 30 year old son Siwash T010B. We didn't see them in 2011 but it's not unusual for a year or 2 to go by without them visiting Clayoquot.

Getting side tracked a bit here, but I think it likely that the Bigg's KW numbers may have been in decline from 1912 – 1968 as during those years, in the interest of salmon predator control, fisheries annually visited coastal sea lion rookeries armed to the teeth with rifles, machine guns and even dynamite. On top of that the fisher folk regularly shot them. Our majestic Long Beach Rocks haul-out was even strafed by fighter planes for target practice during the Second World War. We are slowly becoming more environmentally aware and all the above is behind us now. I don't very often even hear of the First Nation folks harvesting them for food.

Bigg's KWs are somewhat fluid in their grouping so they cannot be classified as pods. As new whales are born and the family group gets too large to feed every one, they need to spread out into other hunting grounds so someone has to go and it's generally the oldest daughter who packs up her kids and splits. The average group size remains at 3 animals. For our purposes we classify these hunting groups as 'gangs' and name them after the matriarch. There are at present 87 gangs representing 272 Bigg's

KWs whose general range is from Northern Washington to Southeastern Alaska; 65 or 73% of whom we've seen here in Clayoquot. In the early days of the study we were advised that all of the animals would likely travel through these waters but I'm hesitantly questioning this as after 22 years I'd have thought we would have identified a much larger percentage of them. Perhaps there are gangs that are quite content with ranges that do not include Clayoquot but these guys are always making a liar out of me.

An interesting progression seen from this catalogue is that when Mike Bigg started it all in 1974, the lineage of most of the animals was unknown but now after 38 years of animals passing on and new animals being born, there are few left whose lineage is not known. Newborns are basically joined at the hip to their Moms for the first year or so making it easy to establish their lineage.

We have seen 16 KWs who are not in the catalogue. These are animals who we call the 'Movie Stars' as their normal plundering ground is California and vicinity, rarely seen in our waters. If these become more frequent visitors, they will be assigned a Bigg's number.

The catalogue can be viewed on line at:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/jz4n77992t475rm/DR1241%20Towers%20et%20al.%202012.%20Bigg%27s%20KW%20Catalogue.pdf>

Strawberry Isle Marine Research Society (SIMRS) is a registered charity based in the Clayoquot Sound on the Westcoast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia. For over 21 years the Society has worked closely with First Nations, various government branches, the local community, as well as other scientific researcher advisors to integrate expertise and knowledge and to coordinate marine monitoring in the Clayoquot Sound. From recording the first sighting of Humpback Whales in Clayoquot Sound to performing necropsies on marine mammal fatalities, SIMRS plays a vital and long standing role in our marine community. Please help this important work continue and make a donation today. Call (250) 725-2211 or email us at info@strawberryisle.org